



RSVP Connections

Connecting Senior Volunteers with Community Needs

Winter 2010

Happy 2010! Each year, many of us make resolutions, and decide (perhaps once again) to tackle those problems and issues that have been holding us back --- by losing weight, exercising, reading more books, re-connecting with friends and family, and so on.

If Erie County could make resolutions, what would be on the list? What are the problems that hold us back --- and how do we begin to make positive changes?

During November's Extreme Makeover project, hundreds of volunteers came out to construct a new home for a low-income family and brighten up the surrounding houses and yards in a troubled neighborhood on Buffalo's West Side. The coordination of this army of volunteers --- from highly skilled construction professionals to high school students --- was a truly amazing feat. Volunteers worked on diverse tasks, but always toward achieving the larger goal of a safer and more attractive block for the residents. The air was filled with camaraderie, excitement, and the anticipation of success. When the week was over, there was a beautiful new home where a previously condemned building had stood, and manicured pocket parks in place of littered vacant lots. After the cameras left, we thought "Let's keep going! There's so much more to do!"

The Extreme Makeover project underscores the potential power of volunteers to make a difference. The project also showed what is necessary to effectively harness this potential: a community's shared vision, clear and compelling goals, an organized plan, motivating and experienced leadership, adequate resources, and volunteer roles and tasks that are well-defined and match volunteers' skills and interests.

Let's make a resolution to keep the spirit of the Extreme Makeover project rolling right through the next decade. Let's use the lessons from that success in order to work toward tangible and significant improvements not only on other streets, but in other arenas such as education, health, and the environment.

For example, perhaps an "Extreme Makeover" project could help to change our Community's troubling and longstanding statistics regarding high rates of illiteracy and school drop-out, and significant gaps in academic success. Read more about some new RSVP opportunities in education and literacy where volunteers can put their skills to work, while helping individuals achieve educational goals leading to a better future.

RSVP believes in the power of volunteers to make a difference --- we witness it every day from the RSVP volunteers who contribute their unique skills and interests to provide over 200,000 hours of service each year!

Pat Dowling, RSVP Director

“Education is the ounce of prevention.”

Educational success is correlated with higher income and more access to jobs and health care. A community with a highly educated workforce is more attractive to new businesses. The goals of a successful education reach across the lifespan:

- Young children who are ready to learn in school
- Middle school students who are at or above grade level in reading and math
- High school students who graduate on time
- Adults who have the skills and knowledge necessary to successfully manage their own finances, careers, families, and communities.

Our community has many excellent public and private schools, including institutions of higher education, which annually graduate thousands of students ready to enter the jobs of the 21st century. However, it is clear more needs to be accomplished:

- Last school year (2008-09), 40% of children entering Kindergarten in Buffalo Public Schools lagged behind their peers in Kindergarten readiness.
- One in three residents of the City of Buffalo is functionally illiterate (Literacy Volunteers, 2005). This statistic is 10% higher than the national average.
- Although Buffalo’s high school graduation rate improved in 2008, it was still only 52% (up from 45% in 2007 and 50% in 2006, according to data by the NY State Education Department). That represents the percentage of students who graduated within four years of entering high school.

Educational failure takes a heavy toll on individuals, families, and the community at large. Seven out of every ten people with very limited literacy are either unemployed or work only part-time. Individuals with low literacy skills are also more likely to be living below the poverty line, and to be imprisoned for crimes.

RSVP has added a number of new opportunities for volunteers wishing to contribute their time and skills to help others achieve their literacy/educational goals. Many of these sites are located in the City of Buffalo where the needs are most acute. A teaching background or expertise in a subject area is a plus, but by no means required. Volunteers will need patience, flexibility, and understanding of the diverse background of students. Sites may require a background check.

41% - 44% of adults with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty.

76% of adults on public assistance are illiterate or unable to read more than the simplest of texts.

Welfare recipients with the lowest educational skills stay on welfare the longest.

60% of prison inmates are illiterate.

Source: literacybuffalo.org

Pre-school:

Holy Cross Head Start Centers offers a pre-kindergarten school experience for 3 and 4-year-old children, centered on literacy, math, and social skills. Volunteers can read to children, help with educational crafts and games, and more at centers in the Town of Tonawanda, Akron, and the City of Buffalo.



Elementary & Middle School:

D'Youville Porter Campus School #3: Almost across from the Extreme Makeover house, you can make an extreme difference for children attending School #3 at 370 Normal Avenue. (The school will be housed here for 18 months while renovations are completed at the Porter Avenue building.) The school has 670 students in grades Pre-K through 8th grade. Most students come from families below poverty level, and many are bilingual (67% of the students are Hispanic). Volunteers are invited to come in the morning to work one-on-one with students who need extra help with reading skills.



The ENERGY (Education, Nurture, Encouragement, Readiness and Growth for Youth) Tutoring Program at Westminster Presbyterian Church (724 Delaware Avenue in Buffalo) serves students from the Ferguson Avenue/Grant Street neighborhood on Buffalo's West Side. Students participate in recreational activities, eat a nutritious supper, and receive individualized homework. The program is open on Tuesdays and Wednesdays from 4:30 to 6:30 PM during the school year. The ENERGY Tutoring Program welcomes additional volunteer tutors, as well as mentors, cooks, substitute tutors, and special activity leaders.

The Gloria J. Parks 4-H After School Program is held in the Gloria J. Parks Community Center, 3242 Main St. in Buffalo for students in grades 1-8 on Monday – Friday, from 3:00 – 6:00 p.m. Volunteer tutors assist students with homework, assist as Literacy Volunteers, as Science Firsthand mentors (hands on science), in fitness and games, chess, computers, arts and music. Training and support for volunteers are available through workshops at the site.

High School Equivalency / GED

Volunteer GED tutors provide one-on-one assistance to adults struggling to meet requirements needed to successfully take the General Education Development (GED) exam and achieve a certificate of high school equivalency. RSVP tutors assist GED students with basic academic skills in the areas of writing, math, and reading comprehension for literature, science, and social studies. Students in GED programs have many challenges to success ---they often come with low reading level or math proficiency. Often the student's attendance suffers due to conflicts with work schedules or responsibilities for child care or other family members.

Asbury Shalom Zone at 520 7th Street in Buffalo, offers a BOCES GED program as part of its mission to assist the poorest of the poor to gain the skills necessary to become self-sufficient.

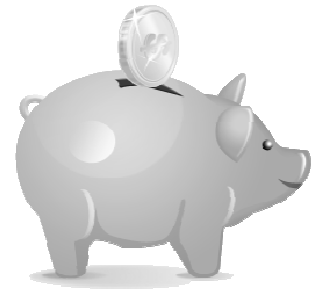


Because many refugees and non-English speaking residents live in this West Side neighborhood, the classes include instruction in English as a second language.

Gerard Place Education Center: Gerard Place, located in the former St. Gerard School on Bailey Avenue near Delavan, offers transitional housing for single parent families as well as supportive programs to curb substance abuse, increase job readiness, computer skills, parenting and other classes geared toward eventual self-sufficiency. Gerard Education Center recently opened in the renovated convent and church buildings to expand their supportive services and programs to the surrounding neighborhood. GED class hours are Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 9AM – 12PM.

Financial Literacy

Junior Achievement: When is something a “want” versus a “need”? How do you balance a checkbook? How do you save up for a down payment on a house? Don't you wish that someone had taught you those things as you were growing up? Now YOU can bring your enthusiasm and life experience to teach children about career exploration, entrepreneurship and financial literacy. Junior Achievement (JA) provides the training, curriculum, and a classroom ready to meet you. JA has programs for students in grades K-12 (complete list at <http://wny.ja.org>) Your time commitment can range from a single school day to a weekly one-hour visit for 5-10 weeks. Choose the grade level that you feel comfortable with, at a school convenient to you.



Adult Literacy

Literacy Volunteers of America/Buffalo & Erie County (LV/BEC)

Literacy Volunteers/BEC, the region's sole provider of free, one-on-one adult literacy services, seeks to improve the well being of families by providing reading, English language learning, and literacy services to anyone wishing to improve their literacy skills. After attending Literacy Volunteers tutor training sessions, tutors meet one-on-one with adult students at local libraries or Literacy Volunteers “drop-in” centers. Many students, particularly in the City of Buffalo, are waiting for a tutor like you.



Erie County Department of Senior Services is here to help ANYBODY, seniors or their families, with ANY question about services or programs that may help an older adult. A real person answers at **858-8526** during business hours, to solve problems or find answers.

RSVP Volunteers—Beginning a New Life Chapter

Volunteers who contact RSVP bring a lifetime of experience, many diverse skills, and unique sets of interests, hoping to find a volunteer experience that is both personally satisfying and makes a meaningful impact. RSVP partner organizations are looking for volunteers who are committed, enthusiastic, dependable, and possess skills and interests that fit specific tasks needed at the agency.

One of the joys RSVP staff feel is helping both potential volunteers and community organizations find a successful match. When a recent retiree contacts the RSVP office to find a place to volunteer, our first questions are, “What do you love to do? What are you interested in? What are the skills you would like to contribute?” Individual answers are the key to successful placement. These three recent retirees found their matches through RSVP, and begin a new chapter in their lives:

Fitness, Fun & Phones:

When Brenda Favor retired from Univera HealthCare as a customer service/ research reimbursement specialist, she wanted to volunteer in order to stay active, meet new people, and give back to the community. Through a on-line posting on VolunteerMatch.com, Brenda contacted RSVP.

Her first interest was health and fitness. “I have always been a true believer in exercise. I was known as the employee who would power walk through the halls on my daily breaks and around the building when weather permitted. During my morning break, I would walk on the treadmill for 7 minutes before returning to work. Because I worked for a health insurance provider, I am very aware of the costs of illness and health care.”

Second, as a result of her employment experiences, Brenda enjoyed working with the public, is comfortable with phone contact and computer databases, and wanted to learn more about the services in the community.

Third, she “loves to give big parties and plan events.” She had coordinated very successful special events at Univera and her church, and found that she enjoyed attending to all the details of planning and organizing these events.

Brenda’s “retired life” is now busy with a diverse set of RSVP volunteer activities.

She leads older adults in a 45-minute Senior Fitness workout with resistance bands two mornings per week at Schiller Park Senior Center and Gloria Parks Community Center.

She volunteers once a week as an information specialist for Central Referral Services/2-1-1 WNY, helping callers to find appropriate community resources. As a HIICAP volunteer, she helps older adults understand their long term care and health insurance options.

Brenda’s new event-planning “career” is well underway. She volunteered for the Olmsted Foundation’s “Picnic in the Park” and afterwards, the Olmsted Volunteer Director e-mailed her: “I have heard nothing but great things about all of the hard work that you have done for the Picnic in the Park. You have done a fantastic job and I wanted to thank you personally. Everyone you worked with said that you were an absolute pleasure to be around.” Since then, Brenda has helped out at other events for Olmsted and other organizations.

Brenda commented that she has become such a busy volunteer now that she wonders if she really did retire! She attributes her attitude toward service to her mother, who was a Foster Grandparent in a Buffalo school for many years.

Brenda’s advice to new retirees: “Get out, get involved, find out your interests, and be of service. You never know what it will lead to!”

House Hunter Extraordinaire

Mark Hall worked at HUD for 30 years before retiring in September 2008. His entire career was in the area of housing finance, administering programs that provided either grants or loan guarantees to enable the acquisition and/or development of a wide variety of housing choices in upstate New York ranging from single family homes to multi-family apartment complexes and even skilled nursing and assisted living facilities.

Mark found that his most rewarding job experiences involved programs that provided affordable housing to those most in need. While at HUD, he gained an understanding of all phases of real estate development and was also a licensed real estate appraiser.

After retiring, Mark now brings the skills he gained at HUD to his RSVP volunteer role at Habitat for Humanity Buffalo, an organization that strives to provide affordable home ownership opportunities for families. Habitat relies almost exclusively on the efforts of volunteers to build or renovate single family homes. The primary source of lots for new construction and homes for rehabilitation is through donation to Habitat.

Mark is a member of Habitat's site acquisition committee. Mark explains, "This committee evaluates prospective properties, works with eligible families to match their interests and needs to viable properties, facilitates the acquisition of the property and coordinates with the construction and rehabilitation components of Habitat until the project is completed. Participation on this committee allows me to **use my experience in the area of affordable housing and real estate appraisal to make a meaningful contribution to a great cause**".

Enterprising Entrepreneur

When Carrie Sweeney decided to retire and sell her successful office supply business, she knew that she wanted to volunteer somewhere that would benefit from her business skills, tremendous energy, and her concern for a successful future for Erie County.

Since then, Carrie has given many hours of service at Habitat for Humanity, the Erie County Office of Veterans Services, and the Family Justice Center. And she found a very special niche at Cornerstone Manor, a shelter for homeless women and children. At Cornerstone, where she helps out in the kitchen, Carrie also found a hero and inspiration, Violet Harris- affectionately known as 'Miss Vi' to Cornerstone clients and volunteers. Miss Vi is the Monday-Friday breakfast and lunch cook. "I prefer to refer to her as a chef, especially when you see her turn donated foods into wonderful meals. She turns ground beef into stews with vegetables and her own homemade gravies, preparing the healthiest meals she can. She is an amazing, wise woman who is loved and respected by all."

Inspired by Miss Vi's resourcefulness and dedication, **Carrie is applying her business acumen and energy to find resources and community partners to meet needs at Cornerstone.** After being approached by Carrie, her church raised significant funds for Cornerstone to replace badly needed kitchen equipment. When Carrie noticed that the menu at Cornerstone often lacked fresh salad vegetables, she approached the Manager at the Tops Market near her home. Carrie's actions paid off: The manager immediately donated two boxes of produce, and directed his assistant managers to set aside produce for Cornerstone every Tuesday from that point on, ensuring a long term solution.

Coming Soon—University Express 2010

The 2009 University Express lifelong learning program was an extraordinary success, with more than 1,000 people attending throughout the Spring and Fall semesters. Past students learned about Amelia Earhart, genealogy, the microbiology of swine flu, history of the electro-chemical industries along the Niagara River, and much, much more. As always, participants rave about the quality of the instructors and the discussion. Instructors enjoy presenting to the University Express audiences, who they consider among the best “students” they have ever encountered.

RSVP sends our deepest thanks to our three partner sites (Canterbury Woods, Cheektowaga Senior Center, and Orchard Park Senior Center), our sponsor, Niagara University; and especially to the incredible volunteer instructors who graciously shared their expertise and passion for teaching and subject areas through our program.

We expect to have the Spring 2010 semester listing ready for distribution by the end of March. Classes topics this semester will include local and national history, literature, and a look at energy options. The listing will be posted on www.erie.gov/rsvp or contact the RSVP office at 858-7548 if you would like to receive a copy by mail.



Finally --- **Our volunteer instructors are THE critical ingredient in the success of University Express. If you know someone who is passionate about a subject and might be interested in teaching --- please let them know that we'd love to talk with them about offering a class.** Interested individuals please call 858-7548 or e-mail Pat at the RSVP office at dowlingp@erie.gov

Congratulations to RSVP volunteer, Joan Suttell, for being named the 2009 Senior Volunteer of the Year by the New York Health Facilities Association. For the past 6 years, Joan has brightened the lives of residents at ElderWood Village at Maplewood in Cheektowaga, assisting with activities, group outings, and other special events. She has even put on theatrical plays and taught hula dancing. “As long as the residents enjoy it, I enjoy it. The smiles I get from the residents – it just makes my day.”

In addition to her work at Maplewood, Joan volunteers in the thrift store at Ladies of Charity.

Thank you to the RSVP volunteers who sewed flannel quilts, and knitted hats, gloves, and scarves given as holiday gifts for children served by Erie County Child Protective Services: Grand Island Golden Age Knitters; West Seneca Senior Center Sewers; and RSVP Volunteer Anna Ornowski. You put smiles on many little faces, and brought warmth to their hearts!

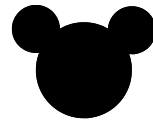
Save the Date and Get in 40 hours Before End of June!
Tribute Day 2010 is Friday, September 24

Join us as we celebrate the many ways RSVP volunteers help address critical problems such as hunger, poverty, literacy, increased independence for aged and disabled adults, etc.!

**** **Remember:** To be invited as a guest to Tribute Day, you must be an active RSVP volunteer **AND** submit to the RSVP office **AT LEAST 40 hours of service for the period July 1, 2009 – June 30, 2010**. If you are concerned you may not meet this requirement, call RSVP at 858-7548 now for additional opportunities, or go to www.erie.gov/rsvp.

To issue invitations, **RSVP Office must receive all hours no later than July 31.**

Give A Day. Get A Disney Day.



RSVP volunteers --- let us recognize your dedicated service with a **FREE** day at DisneyWorld!

HandsOn Network and Disney Parks want to inspire one million people to volunteer a day of service through the “Give A Day. Get A Disney Day” program that celebrates good works by giving each qualified volunteer one day admission to a theme park at Disneyland Resort or Walt Disney World Resort, free.

To qualify, interested RSVP volunteers must pre-register and sign up for “Erie County RSVP” opportunities found on www.disneyarks.com in order to participate.

Log on to www.disneyarks.com. Click on “Start” under the words “Give a Day. Get A Disney Day.” Follow the directions to search Volunteer Opportunities. Erie County RSVP appears under the heading “Health and Human Services.” You will be asked to provide your contact information, the dates and times of your day of service, and other information.

After you complete the day of service, RSVP will verify your volunteer attendance for the date of service before the theme park ticket is redeemed.

There are a few stipulations:

Ticket quantities for the program are limited. One ticket per person, regardless of the number of times you volunteer. Program begins January 1, 2010 and continues until tickets are distributed or until December 15, 2010, whichever occurs first. Your voucher for the free ticket must be redeemed by December 15, 2010. Volunteers must be at least 18 to sign up. You may only sign up a maximum of 8 members of your household. Children must be at least 6 to participate in the program.

If you take advantage of this program, please send RSVP a photo of you enjoying your Day At Disney! We’d love to see and post them on the RSVP website.

RSVP Bids a Fond Farewell & Congratulations to Sharon Measer, upon her “retirement.” RSVP Program Secretary for the past 11 years, Sharon was long known as “The Voice of Hospitality and Central Information; the All-Knowing Wizard of Mileage Reimbursement; The Managing Editor of the RSVP Van Schedule; and the Della Street of the RSVP Office.” We Miss You, Sharon!